

Christian Unity

SERMON · Crossing Every Boundary: God's Love for All People · 12 November 2017 (Unity Sunday)

John 17:11 (quoted)

John 17:20-26

John 17:21 (quoted)

Colossians 3:12-17 (quoted)

Psalms 133

Ezekiel 37:15-19

The Church of South India has designated today as Unity Sunday, and so the theme for today's meditation is 'Christian Unity'. Let me begin by asking a question. Do we pray often enough for Christian unity? In the Gospel passage read to us from John 17:20, we find Jesus sharing His greatest burden for His followers: oneness, and unity. When Christians are 'one', we provide a visible and tangible witness to the world. Jesus knew that the Church could never make the impact on the world that He wished, unless the world saw the Church in spiritual oneness and unity. The churches, in turn, have never taken these words of Jesus with the seriousness they deserve. The result is before us: the Church has broken up into thousands of factions and sub-factions across the two thousand years of its existence. And yet there is reason for hope, as church leaders the world over have awakened afresh to the need for unity amongst the people of the largest religion in the world, and several ecumenical efforts are now underway.

If you ask me, I would say that the single most compelling reason for disunity amongst Christians is the 'I, me, mine, and me first' attitude. This began quite early, even before the Church itself came into being. If we go back to John 17:11, we see Jesus praying for His disciples: "And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are." Even within that original company, there were real tensions. James and John caused an outrage of jealousy among the other disciples when they asked for the seats at Jesus' right and left hand in heaven; and not long before that, the disciples had been fuming with rage over an argument among themselves as to who was the greatest. That original band of disciples had already shown a spirit of selfishness, competition, and disunity, and this must have grieved the heart of Jesus. No wonder He prayed, in effect, 'Lord, make them one.'

This concern for the unity of God's people is not confined to the time Jesus walked this earth, or to the years after Pentecost. The Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, who had earlier prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, was later given a message of hope for God's

people in exile: through the sign of two sticks joined together into one in his hand, God showed him how the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah would be reunited as a single people once again (Ezekiel 37:15-19).

This same 'me first' attitude has permeated every walk of Christian life, resulting in differing methods of worship, conflicting propagation of Christian belief, and the proclamation of tweaked doctrines, among other things. Some Christians believe themselves more blessed by Jesus than others; some believe that standing nearer the altar in church brings them closer to God. But the basic principle for all of us is that every believer in Christ stands at an equal distance from the Cross. Jesus cannot be monopolised.

The fact remains that if Christians cannot be unified, we are not approaching one another in love, and we cannot be a good witness for Christ while we are bickering with one another. Paul was persuasive on this very subject in his letter to the Colossians: "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him" (Colossians 3:12-17).

Christians may belong to different churches, contemporary and traditional, denominational and non-denominational, but we all belong to the one living God, Jesus Christ. We are to love one another, which is the perfect bond of unity. I wonder how Jesus feels when He sees the condition of His Church today. God's word tells us just how important this unity is: God loved each of us before the foundation of the world! Discord and division are unbecoming of Christians. For wolves to trouble the lambs is no great wonder, but for one lamb to trouble another is unnatural, and monstrous.

Let us examine the very basics of Christian unity. Real unity is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He has already given His glory to us, and He promises that we will experience that glory still further when we come to His new creation. All true believers carry God's glory within, whatever they may look like on the outside; Christian harmony is not built on the external, but on the internal, for the very Spirit of God dwells within us.

One of the things that impresses the world most is the way Christians love one another, and live together in harmony, not only amongst themselves but with others too. But I must say that the world also thrives on just the opposite; this is seen whenever there is disunity within the Christian Church, whenever believers act like everyone else, relying on their own human nature rather than on the Spirit of God who dwells within them. I believe, therefore, that we must rely on our Heavenly Father to keep us unified, and to keep us focused on what matters most in life: a relationship with Jesus Christ, and the bringing of others into that same relationship, through our words and through our actions.

The pattern for the unity of believers should be unlike anything else on earth; it is nothing less than the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity. It is to the Trinity that we must look for the pattern of unity amongst Christians, though the divine union is quite unlike any union of persons or things in this world. The Eastern Orthodox tradition has a beautiful way of describing this, through the Greek term perichoresis, meaning the mutual indwelling of each Person of the Trinity within the others; it is often pictured, as an illustration rather than as the word's own derivation, as a kind of dance, the three Persons of God weaving in and out of one another in a blissful, dynamic, and eternal circle. That is the example we must learn from: we may come from the most diverse of backgrounds, and still be united in Christ. This is precisely what Jesus prayed for: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us" (John 17:21).

The blessing that such unity among the Christian community will bring is this: the present Church on earth, and the future Church in heaven, will together see the glory of Jesus. 'Glory' is the visible manifestation of all the divine attributes; it is what we see when we look upon Jesus, God the Son. Our churches will never be fully united by looking to a pastor, or a programme, or to one another. In just the same way, our own fellowship will never be fully united by looking to any leader or programme as the answer to unity, unless all of us look up to Jesus for the strength of conviction that perfect unity requires. Amen.

Let us pray.

O God, who hast given us the vision of unity and concord, we praise You for the possibility You have granted us to worship together in unity; help us to grow in unity as a community that worships You in truth and in spirit, so that we may fulfil Your great desire of one flock and one shepherd; let this unity in worship strengthen our witness in the world around us; through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for evermore. Amen.

Logos Ministry Archive — a collection of sermons, studies and devotional writing.